

Margot Asquith Revelations—Henry Adams' Reticence

Friend of Poets and Statesmen

MARGOT ASQUITH: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY. Two volumes. George H. Doran Company.

Heralded in advance on both sides of the Atlantic as a coming sensation, Mrs. Asquith's autobiography has fulfilled all the prophecies. London newspapers have devoted columns to the book, some calling it the adventures of "Malice in Blunderland," others keenly championing the lady's frankness. Margot Asquith promised to write "without fear or favor exactly what I think and with a strict regard for the unmodelled truth." Curious it is, perhaps, that the book should express so much of the vivid personality of the writer that it is evoking the same sort of bitter partisanship that Margot Asquith has evoked herself during her whole unusual lifetime.

On this side of the water casual comments are diametrically opposed. A man who has lived in London for the last five years thus expresses the harsh view: "The book is unpleasant. Margot Asquith has been quite spoiled always by the people about her. Now she is trying to enlarge her circle of admirers to the whole world." But a reader who had looked for the actual merits in the book and found them declared: "Mrs. Asquith was maligned when people called her 'the woman with the serpent's tongue.' She is not bitter; she is keenly alive—a vital woman who has been too much engrossed in her own consciousness to bother about the effect of her words upon others."

Here is reality—the actual stuff and substance from which situations and events are fashioned. Ward and Wood, she has shown us the underside of the tapestry of English social and political life during the last decade. One may find some of the revelations in execrable taste, but it must be admitted that in breaking all the rules Mrs. Asquith has made the game about six times more entertaining and startling than usual. Having disregarded from earliest youth the question "What will people say?" she has made this amazingly frank book the climax of her amazing career.

Born at Glen, in Scotland, the daughter of Sir Charles Tennant, she spent a "glorious youth" running rather wild on Scottish moors, where she laid the foundations for her subsequent performances on the hunting field. Smoking with a tramp and fighting in a public house in London while working the slums were characteristic exploits of her youth. On the other side of the picture she was starting the world of society by attracting royal attention from the Prince of Wales by appearing at a dinner in a muslin dress.

Having been presented to the Prince of Wales in the paddock at Ascot by Lady Dalhousie and having won a gold cigarette case on the races from him, she writes: "Before I knew the Prince and Princess of Wales I did not go to fashionable balls, but after that Ascot I was asked everywhere."

Of seeing Lady Randolph Churchill for the first time she writes: "She had a forehead like a panther's and great wild eyes that looked through you. She was so arresting that I followed her about till I found some one who could tell me who she was. Had Lady Randolph been like her face she could have governed the world."

Having known seven Prime Ministers more or less intimately, she writes strikingly personal things about them. As to Gladstone's questioned sense of humor she quotes a story of her husband's. One day in the House he and Gladstone were discussing the comparative ugliness of the members. Finally Gladstone said: "Apply a very simple test. Imagine X and Y magnified on a colossal scale. X's ugliness would then begin to look dignified and even impressive, while the more you enlarged Y the meaner he would become."

She makes a strong claim for the good influence of a famous circle: "Mr. Balfour once told me that before our particular group of friends—generally known as the Souls—appeared in London prominent politicians of opposite parties seldom if ever met one another. The same question of home rule that threw London back to the old parliaments in 1914 was at its height in 1886 and 1887, but at our house in Grosvenor Square, and later in those of the Souls, every one met—Randolph Churchill, Gladstone, Asquith, Hartington, Harcourt, and I might add, jockeys, actors, the Prince of Wales and every Ambassador in London. We never cut anybody—not even our friends—or thought it amusing or distinguished to make people feel uncomfortable, and our decision not to sacrifice private friendship to public politics was envied in every capital in Europe. It made London the centre of the most interesting society in the world and gave men of different tempers and opposite beliefs an opportunity of discussing them without heat and without reporters. There is no individual or group among us powerful enough to succeed in having a salon of this kind to-day."

Of the late Duchess of Devonshire, the last great political lady in London

society as she had known it, Mrs. Asquith writes: "The secret of her power lay not only in her position—many people are rich, grand, gay and clever and live in big houses—but in her elasticity, her careful criticism, her sense of justice and discretion. She not only kept her own but other people's secrets and she added to a considerable effrontery and intrepid courage real kindness of heart."

Gladstone's lighter side is revealed in a poem and letters quoted by Mrs. Asquith. She also describes a visit from the Grand Old Man and his wife, "Aunt Pussy—as we called Mrs. Gladstone—with a great deal of winking and a great deal of winking: 'William and Margot are going to have a little talk!'"

This occurred ten days before the last great speech on home rule. He said to Mrs. Asquith, after discussing the Irish question: "Tories have no hope, no faith. Disraeli was a great Tory. It grieves me to see people believing in Randolph Churchill as his successor, for he has none of the genius, patience or insight which 'Dizzy' had in no small degree."

Later Mr. Gladstone told her that he was giving a dinner to the Liberal party that night, and added: "If Hartington is in a good humor I intend to say to him, 'Don't move a vote of want of confidence in me after dinner or you will very likely carry it.'"

The very chapter headings in the book suggest the variety and fascination of its contents: "The Beautiful Kate Vaughan"; "Coached by Coquelin in Molière"; "Rosebery's Popularity and Eloquence"; "Campbell-Bannerman, Bon-Vivant and Boulevardier"; "Balfour's Mot; His Charm and Wit; His Tastes and Preferences; His Religious Speculation."

Of Arthur Balfour, a friend from earliest youth, she writes: "Balfour was blessed or cursed at his birth, according to individual opinion, by two assets—charm and wit. The first he possessed to a greater degree than any man, except John Morley, that I have ever met. His social distinction, exquisite attention, intellectual tact, cool grace and a lovely bend of the head made him not only a flattering listener but an irresistible companion. The disadvantage of charm—which makes me say cursed or blessed—is that it inspires every one to combine and smooth the way for you throughout life. His wit, with which I say that he was also cursed or blessed, quite apart from his brains, gave him confidence in his improvisations and the power to sustain any opinion on any subject whether he held the opinion or not, with equal brilliance, plausibility and success, according to his desire to dispose of you or the subject. He either finessed with the ethical basis of his intellect or had none. This made him unintelligible to the average man, unforgivable to the fanatic and a god to the blunderer. With his perfect literary style and keen interest in philosophy and religion nothing but a great love of politics could account for his not having given up more of his time to writing."

One night at a ball Balfour was taxed with being about to marry Margot Tennant, and replied: "No, that is not so. I rather think of having a career of my own."

Even this frankest of autobiographers omits her husband and Lloyd George with the terse: "Of the two other Prime Ministers I cannot write, though no one knows them better than I do. No one will deny that all of us should be allowed some private property in thought."

John Addington Symonds and the famous master of Balliol, Dr. Benjamin Jowett, were among the author's unusual friends. Of conversationalists she writes: "I shall always think Lord Morley the best talker I ever heard, and after him I would say Symonds, Birrell and Bergson. George Meredith was too much of a prima donna and was very deaf and unintelligible when I knew him, but he was amazingly good even then. Alfred Austin was a friend of his, and had just been made Poet Laureate by Lord Salisbury when my beloved friend, Admiral Maxse, took me and few of us to the country to see Meredith for the first time. Feeling more than usually stupid, I said to him: "Well, Mr. Meredith, I wonder what you friend Alfred Austin thinks of his appointment?"

"Shaking his beautiful head, he replied: 'It is very hard to say what a bantam is thinking when it is crowing.'"

Bohemian society she found "duller than any English watering place." She writes: "Every one has a different conception of hell, and few of us connect it with flames; but stage suppers are my idea of hell, and, with the exception of Irving and Coquelin, Ellen Terry and Sarah Bernhardt, I have never met the hero or heroine of the stage that was not ultimately dull."

Of a well dressed friend's clothes she writes: "I do not know who could have worn his clothes when they were new, but certainly he never did."

One is tempted to go on indefinitely quoting Mrs. Asquith's comments on the people and events of the tremendously interesting world in which she lived and from which she has taken every bit of beauty possible for her to take, and to which she has given as much as lay in her power.

Civil War Letters From Overseas

A CYCLE OF ADAMS LETTERS, 1861-1865. Edited by Worthington Chauncey Ford. In two volumes. Houghton Mifflin Company.

Reviewed by STANTON A. COBLENTZ.

Letter writing is in a sense the most genuine of the arts, because the most unconscious and spontaneous. These letters of the Adams family have a twofold claim to recognition. They constitute a noteworthy historical document, and in their narrower aspects they contain a record of three personalities—Charles Francis Adams, American Minister to England during the civil war, and his two sons, Henry Adams and Charles Francis Adams, Jr. In the present edition are included only those letters written during the tempestuous years from 1861 to 1865, when the senior Adams was exerting his diplomatic skill to the utmost at the hostile court at London, while his son Henry was serving as his private secretary and Charles Francis Adams, Jr., was seeing action as an officer in the Federal forces.

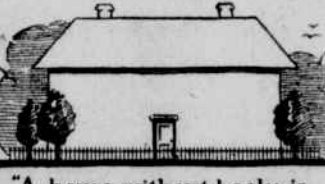
Written as they are from either side of the Atlantic, the Adams letters steep one in the wartime atmosphere of both England and of America, and better, perhaps, than any deliberate work of history, they succeed in making real again the prevailing emotions of the day. We can not only feel but feel the rising tide of Northern apprehension following the outbreak of the war; we can share in the bewilderment and alarm of the Northerners at their early reverses; we can exult with them at Vicksburg and Gettysburg, rejoice and triumph in the Emancipation Proclamation; sigh with gladness and relief at the close of the conflict. How desperate was the Federal cause at the opening of the war may be seen from a statement by Charles Francis Adams, Jr., who in the middle of 1861 writes regarding the Confederate States: "Their ultimate independence is, I think, assured." How hostile to us was the feeling abroad, and in England in particular, may be divined from the words of Charles Francis Adams, Sr., who, following the fall of Vicksburg, writes from London: "The salons of this great metropolis are in tears; tears of anger mixed with grief. They, moreover, refuse to be comforted. They deny that it was possible. Fate cannot be so cruel!"

The emotions of the Adams family are the more readily comprehensible because they correspond so closely with our own emotions during a more recent war. There is the same impatience, the same passive resignation and impatient anger, the same grinding suspense, dread and anxiety and the same final exultation. And the descriptions of the conflict by Charles Francis Adams, Jr., read like letters from Americans enlisted in the contest with Germany. Trenches, poison gas and other such modern contrivances

are, of course, absent—but the general spirit is the same. Moreover, the writer labors under some misconceptions which are a trifle amusing from a present day point of view, and which may correspond with some of our own misconceptions. Regarding Lincoln, for example, the younger Charles Francis Adams declares: "The President is not equal to the crisis. I am tired of incompetents, and I want to see Lincoln forced to adopt a manly line of policy which all men may comprehend. The people here call for energy, not change, and if Lincoln were only a wise man he would unite them in spite of party cries, and with an eye solely to the public good."

So much for the purely historical aspects of the Adams letters. Charles Francis Adams, Sr., stands clearly before us as an astute, keenminded diplomat, gifted with considerable insight and humor; Henry Adams as a sober, reflective youth whom we might well suspect of designing a famous autobiography; Charles Francis Adams, Jr., as a man of action, decisive in the act of thinking. He constantly arrives at judgments which history more often than not disproves. A remarkable family, the Adams, remarkable in what they lack as well as in their gifts. Leading citizens in a democratic state, they themselves belong to the aristocracy; they realize that they belong to the aristocracy, deplore the fact, perhaps, and yet take pride in it; they are not as others, and do not want to be as others; they prefer to pose on a pedestal of their own making. That this is so is amply demonstrated by various remarks in their letters. For example, Charles Francis Adams, Jr., writes to his mother with a levity beneath which his serious beliefs are apparent: "In our serious each man takes his turn in washing up the dishes. . . . So once in ten days or so visitors see the best blood in America, in the person of your son, washing dishes, sweeping floors, wheeling coal, &c., like a family servant."

This is perhaps not unpardonable; it is what thousands think but do not say; it is the snobbery of which the enlightened are as guilty as the grossly ignorant. And when all is said it is wholly overshadowed in the Adams family by more generous qualities in which it is lost almost as spots are lost in the sun, observed upon close inspection but from a distance invisible in the blaze of surrounding light.



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The Mystic View of Henry Adams

LETTERS TO A NIECE. By Henry Adams. Houghton Mifflin Company.

One of the ablest critics of "The Education of Henry Adams" expressed in the Atlantic what many readers had felt about that pyrotechnical display—that in spite of all the brilliance, Adams lacked the simplicity, the childlike approach toward the riddle of the universe that a great love or a great faith might have given him. The reviewer maintained that Mr. Adams, having revealed such profound doubts, owed a sort of summing up of final beliefs. If he had any, for the benefit of the world to which the "Education" was to go as a last word of a philosophy of life.

And now comes a thin volume, including "A Niece's Memories," in which the human side of that remarkable mind and man is given to the world. Even in the letters, charming, friendly, written to beloved kin—woman, filled with appreciation of the simplest things in life, as well as the most profound—children, dogs, bits of country—Henry Adams retained his restraint and almost superhuman reticence that can only be described as the very essence of the Boston aristocratic tradition. He left it for Mabel La Forge in her introduction to lift the veil of his inner world.

Shy, "sensitive to the point of pain," occasionally subject to a "panic of reserve," filled with humility and self-abasement, an "admirer and awe-inspired playmate of the tiniest child who walked into his study," Henry Adams is shown us as a man with a "genius for buying children's toys," who would spend "hours at the Nain Bleu or the Magasins du Louvre choosing a combination of toys with the care and feeling for the child's viewpoint as if he were arranging a choice bunch of flowers."

Surely this is not the author of the almost brittle brilliancies of the pages of the "Education"—this man with a passionate absorption in the miracle of the transmission of life that eventually led him to find his answer to the eternal mysteries in the eternal verity of the "Virgin of Chartres." Tremendously saddened by a great personal sorrow that led him through the gateway into the great impersonal brotherhood of the suffering, Henry Adams learned to say, "People who suffer beyond the formulas of expression, who are crushed into silence and beyond pain, want no display of emotion, no bleeding heart, no weeping at the foot of the Cross, no hysterics, no phrases! They want to see God and to know He is watching over His own."

What William James in his "Varieties of Religious Experience" calls a "twice-born soul" was Henry Adams. We need to realize that the second birth did occur after mighty travail. After seeking in the winding labyrinth of the ancient East for Nirvana, the consolations afforded by Kwanon (out of which came the inspiration later passed on to Saint Gaudens and utilized in the unforgettable statue in Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington) the wandering spirit found peace in the centre of Medievalism that had ministered to thousands of weary souls before laying cool hands upon him.

Henry Adams, in a "Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres," found among his papers after his death, comes as near a testimonial of faith as one needs to go. Having ceased to strive, "ceased even to care what new coin fate shall strike," he is left at the feet of the Virgin, repudiating the future science and staking his all on the "energy of faith." That Henry Adams felt keenly the world's failure to perceive any light is admitted, but of his own complete realization of the "true light" after reading this prayer there is no doubt.

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